European Journal of Food Drink and Society

Volume 1 | Issue 1 Article 4

2021

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European Journal of Food, Drink, and Society
2021, Vol. 1, No. 1, 55-78

"Dinner Is the Great Trial": Sociability and *Service à la Russe* in the Long Nineteenth Century

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Abstract

The shift from service à la Française to service à la Russe that took place between 1850 and 1880 changed Victorian sociability and the Victorian dinner table. In the former style of service all the dishes were put on the table and then carved by the host; in the latter most of the dishes were placed not on the table but upon a sideboard and from there handed to guests individually by the servants. This new "taste regime" had implications not just for the style of food but the conduct of the table and the taste and style of the wines served during the meal, leading to the emergence of a rigid and still enduring code of food and wine matching. The shift to à la Russe also affected the glassware and the decorations on the table. Finally, the shift to "Service à la Russe" exposed tensions and changes in Victorian sociability. The dinner party represented the "great trial" for aspiring members of Victorian upper and upper middle class. Conduct at the dinner table cruelly exposed not only the behavioural solecisms of the guests but also the ability of the host and hostess to manage the complex alimentary and social machinery of the dinner party. The article concludes by examining the reasons for and implications of the early twentieth century switch to entertaining not at home but in restaurants.

Keywords

A la russe / A la francaise; Etiquette; Sociability; Gendered behaviour; Dining

In his 1865 novel, *Miss Mackenzie*, Anthony Trollope focused his attention – and his ire – on a fictional dinner party in the increasingly fashionable à la Russe style (Trollope 1936, ch. VIII). The setting for this infelicitous event was the home of Mr and Mrs Tom Mackenzie. Reputedly successful and wealthy, he "either had or was supposed to have as much as eight hundred a year in income" and the dinner party is presented as Mrs Mackenzie's efforts to show her guests – in particular her husband's unmarried sister – her family's status and sophistication.

Though Trollope's account is both fictional and determinedly uncomplimentary it illustrates very clearly the prevailing mid-century "rules" of the à la Russe style. The first course was a "clear soup", which had been bought in from a pastrycook who had also provided the butler, Mr Grandairs, "a very dignified person in white cotton gloves." Then came a fish course followed by "three little dishes" of which nothing is

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said beyond their "fabricated" nature and their essential unpalatability. The fish, in a breach of the "rules", is already on the table when the guests take their seats – and is, therefore, already getting cold (as is the melted butter sauce). In a further breach of the rules the saddle of mutton and the pair of boiled fowls are carved by the host and one of the guests (who does a rather poor job) although, wrote Trollope (with his tongue firmly in his cheek), "the à la Russe construction of the dinner was maintained by keeping the tongue on the sideboard".

The essence of service à la Russe was that all the main dishes were served from the sideboard by servants rather than placed upon the table for either guests to help themselves or for the host and hostess to dispense. But this style depended upon a sufficiency of servants. Grandairs, for all his pretensions, is not up to the task and, as later writers recognized, one man simply could not serve ten guests. The dinner winds to an unsatisfying and rather perfunctory close. The macaroni were "ruined"; the "fine-coloured pyramids of shaking sweet things" were left uneaten, as were the "onion-flavoured ice puddings". It was, said Trollope "all misery, wretchedness and degradation". The disconsolate Mrs Mackenzie is left to wonder: "[w]hy on earth did she perplex her mind and bruise her spirit, giving dinner à la anything?"

Why indeed? What was it about this style of service and table layout that made it the dominant habit among the British "dinner-giving grades" at least until World War One (*Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian* 10 May 1862, 8)? What does its adoption from the 1830s onwards and its survival until well into the twentieth century tell us about Victorian society?

The nature of the à la Russe style was summed up in 1885 by the cookery writer Phillis Browne. As she explained, the "difference between the old-fashioned dinner and the dinner à la Russe is that in the first all the dishes are put upon the table and carved by the host or his representative, and in the latter the food is not put on the table at all, but is handed round by servants" (*Newcastle Courant* 26 June 1885, 6).

The distinction may seem arcane since servants were central to all styles of service but the switch from earlier styles of service had profound implications not just for the food and wine consumed by the diners but for the decoration of the table, the cutlery and glassware, the gender roles of host and hostess and the very nature of Victorian sociability itself.

I will argue that these changes constituted a fundamental shift in the culinary taste regime of nineteenth-century Britain. A "taste regime" is defined as a system that "orchestrates practice in an aesthetically oriented culture of consumption" (Arsel and Bean 2013, 899). The nineteenth-century à la Russe dinner party encoded by the taste regime was not a fixed practice but rather an "orchestrating concept" (Hand and Shove 2004, 247) in which relations between hosts and guests, etiquette and conviviality, food and wine shifted continually.

Methodology and Sources

Before turning to more detailed analysis of the far-reaching impacts of the shift from à la Française to à la Russe I will detail the methodology and sources used. The principal source (little used by other researchers in this field) has been British newspapers and magazines – both national and provincial. I have made extensive use of the British Newspaper Archive (https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk) which details over 4,500 uses of the term "à la Russe" between 1800 and 1949 (though some of these relate to individual dishes cooked "Russian style"). Whilst à la Russe service appears to have remained fashionable until the first decade of the twentieth century, the great bulk of these references (over 3000) occur in the years 1860-79. These references occur not just in English newspapers but in their Irish and Scottish counterparts. This was a trend that covered the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland.

The references come in a variety of different types of articles. Some satirise the style or bemoan the "tyranny" of fashion, some detail the dishes and – very occasionally – the associated wines at public dinners conducted in the à la Russe style. Others, particularly those articles aimed at women, which became more common in the last decades of the nineteenth century, were more concerned with explicating the style and its modifications over the years. Such articles touch not only on food and drink but on the important associated issues of table decoration, glassware, table manners, the servant "problem", and the overarching etiquettes of sociability in different social circles. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, such articles focused increasingly on the female reader and, as Margaret Beetham has indicated through her analysis of periodicals aimed at women, the writers were constructing and deploying an ideal of femininity focused around providing for and managing the household which may not necessarily have corresponded to lived practice (Beetham 1996, 5-8).

For the "rules" governing social conduct and, by inference, the importance of the dinner party as a locus of hospitality and social display, I have also made use of the proliferation of nineteenth-century advice manuals dealing with "etiquette" or "manners" (Hughes 2014; Weller 2014, 664-5). The chapter(s) relating to "dinner" and "dining" in these manuals are frequently the longest, suggesting the importance of the topic to socially aspiring or anxious Victorians. For example, in Eliza Cheadle's highly popular *Manners of Modern Society* (1878) and its 1893 re-edition by Lady Colin Campbell the chapter on "Dinners" occupies 27 pages. "Balls", that other staple of Victorian sociability, has but twelve (Cheadle 1878, 127-53).

Such books of social advice are variously classified by their authors (and later commentators) as dealing with "etiquette", "manners" and "conduct" but all share a preoccupation with the codification and transmission of information for the aspiring or socially anxious (Weller 2014, 677 for definition). They do not necessarily reflect the precise behaviour of any given individual (or even a given social tier) but, taken together, they provide valuable insight into the principles which were assumed to lie

behind conduct at the dinner table (Bryson 1998, 3-4). As well as general guidance, a number also provide menus for different forms of dinner as well as diagrams of table layouts and decorations and thus overlap to an extent with other important nineteenth-century manuals, those dealing with food provision and household management (for costed menus for every form of entertainment, see Anonymous 1880). Some provide extensive seasonal (even daily) menus; others offer a broader overview of the advantages and disadvantages of the à la Russe style (Browne 1879 for daily recipes; Humble 2000 for Mrs Beeton's view of advantages and disadvantages). Although some recipe books provide information about the structure of the meal and the types of dishes associated with each stage of the meal, these are generally less helpful about the social pressures that I argue lay behind the development and continued importance of this style of dining.

That the social pressures were real is a foundational premise of this literature. The 1881 *Manners of the Aristocracy* vividly evokes the pressure on the nervous guest to behave correctly:

> Nor is a glaring solecism necessary to point out the man or woman unaccustomed to dine in good society, An uneasy, restless manner, loud voice or watchful eyes, betray their owner immediately, HE is ill at ease and out of his element, and not all his efforts can conceal that he is so (Anonymous 1881, 143).

For the insecure, as one of publisher Frederick Warne's "Bijou Books" put it, "dining is the great trial". Conversation, the protocols of calling and even dress could be mastered but the dinner table was the true test (Anonymous 1867, 8-9).

The pressures and insecurity were not confined to the guests. Without noticeable sympathy (though much practical advice), Cheadle commented that "a dinner party throughout is a trying ordeal to a young and unseasoned hostess" (Cheadle 1878, 139). Even for guests – regardless how seasoned and sophisticated they might be – the Victorian dinner party was apparently something of an ordeal. The standard form of invitation requested the "pleasure" of another's company but, if the books of advice are to be believed, the experience was rather different. Lady Violet Greville in her *Gentlewoman in Society* (1892) commented that dinner was a "duty to Society" from which "[n]o enjoyment is expected or received" (Greville 1892, 86). George Sims wrote in 1901 of the "chill" of most dinner parties; contrasting them with the pleasures of the "homely party" in an "unfashionable quarter of London" (Sims 1901, 274-5). So why did the dinner à la Russe conquer Victorian dining? Why, when and how did it become the fashion?

The Historiography of Dinner à la Russe

The introduction of the à la Russe style is generally credited to Prince Boris Kourakin (or Kourakine), a Russian diplomat, whose 1810 reception in Paris broke with the standard "à la Française" style of placing all the dishes on the table before the entry of

his guests. Instead his guests were served with ready-plated food (Strong 2002, 296-7). Though there were scattered references in the 1810s and 1820s, this style of service was rare until "adopted by a few high families" in the 1830s (*Notes and Queries* 25 May 1872, 422). In 1831 the *Servants' Guide and Family Manual* described dinners "served in the style termed *à la Russe*" as a "novelty" adopted in the "season of 1829" (Anonymous 1831, 194). Henry de la Pasture's comic novel, *Real Pearls* (1839), featured a dinner "served *à la Russe,* in the true style of elegance". The table held nothing but fruit, flowers and a "large cut glass receiver […] containing water and gold fishes" fed by an artificial, clockwork-driven fountain (de la Pasture 1839, II, 66).

Painstaking research by Valerie Mars has elucidated the gradual adoption, evolution and modification of the à la Russe style through the course of the nineteenth century (Mars 1997, 185-262), while Andrea Broomfield has discussed how late-nineteenth-century kitchen technologies were introduced to ease adoption of the new style into smaller, middle-class households (Broomfield 2007, 122-47).

By the late 1850s the à la Russe style was familiar to many. An editorial in *The Times* complaining of the "palling monotony of English middle-class feasts" provoked a lively correspondence arguing for (and against) the à la Russe style (*The Times* 3 January 1859, 6; 7 January 1859, 7). *Punch,* noting how much had been written "recently" on the topic, added its own jokes and poems (A Rustic 1862). Provincial newspapers began to attempt to define the difference between à la Russe and à la Française, focusing on the table decoration and style of service:

> When the table is decorated with fruits and flowers, silver, crystal, porcelain, elegant ware of any kind – in fact, the desert [sic] – and the hot dishes served by the attendants from side-tables, *that* constitutes a *diner à la Russe* (*Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian* 10 May 1862, 8).

Despite giving instructions (and sample menus) for the new style, Mrs Beeton was ambivalent. She accepted that it might save "modern gentlemen" from acquiring the skill of carving but insisted that it was:

> scarcely suitable for small establishments; large number of servants being required to carve and to help the guests; besides there being a necessity for more plates, knives and forks, spoons, than are usually to be found in any other than a very large establishment (Humble 2000, 386).

Variations – known as "demi-Russe" or "half-length" or "English" style – developed over the next fifty years and, even in the early 20th century, newspapers could suggest a contemporary shift to the à la Russe style at the "up-to-date dinner table" (*Dundee Evening Telegraph* 27 October 1902, 6).

From the 1870s onwards, there was general agreement on its (many) advantages and (supposedly few) disadvantages. The principal advantage proposed by commentators was that despite the number of dishes it was more economical since

there was less waste. For example, the hostess did not have to present a whole salmon on the table of which half would go to the servants but could budget for a precise number of guests. Secondly, it made the room cleaner and cooler since there were no "smoking joints and steaming preparations" that raised the temperature and left smells of cooking fat and burnt meat, though some writers complained that placing the dessert on the table meant that it absorbed the smell of the meat and fish (Loftie 1878, 126). Handed dishes meant "no stretching over guests" and the use of servants meant that the hosts could concentrate on their guests and the conversation – to the extent that one writer could claim in 1885 that dinner could now become "an intellectual recreation" (*Newcastle Courant* 26 June 1885, 6).

But, as press comments made clear, there were problems and disadvantages. An 1868 article about "modern hospitality" contrasted the "modern middle class dinner party" with an "Arcadian picture" in which the "truly hospitable man will […] ask three or four persons to dinner, who he knows will suit each other [and] give them a few well cooked dishes, and a bottle of two of good wine" (*Cheltenham Chronicle* 11 August 1868, 5). This was a prescription of which Trollope would have heartily approved, if one accepts the comments voiced by the genial and generous Toogoods in *The Last Chronicle of Barset.* For Toogood and his wife, dinners à la Russe were "so luxurious that one can't live up to them at all [yet] not a morsel on the table fit to eat" (Trollope 1980 [1867], 403, 406).

Yet, despite the complaints of traditionalists such as Trollope and the common assertion that neither hosts and hostesses nor guests found dinners less than an ordeal, the dinner party in the à la Russe style became the "apogee of the social day" (Langland 1995, 47); a judgment confirmed by contemporary manuals:

> Dinner-parties rank first amongst all entertainments […] having more social significance and being more appreciated by society than any other form of entertainment [and] the highest compliment, socially speaking, that is offered by one person to another ("A Member of the aristocracy" 1879, 82).

How did they gain this position and what were the implications of this new "taste regime" on the dinner party and Victorian sociability?

The importance of the dinner party, a "peculiarly British phenomenon" (Tombs and Tombs 2006, 421) was that it facilitated home entertaining at a period when women's ability to visit places of public entertainment became increasingly limited after the 1850s. Only with the liberalization of the 1880s and 1890s did visiting restaurants become socially acceptable for women (see Newnham-Davis 1899, passim; Mac Con Iomaire 2013). Access to the home throughout this period was controlled by "sophisticated rituals" (Bailey 1998, 17-18). By the late 1850s, contemporaries agreed that the "dinner party is the main institution of society in this country", citing one Member of Parliament who "did not approve of any but dinner-parties" for his daughter (A Matron 1859, 66, 301).

In this peculiarly British institution, the mistress of the household played a disproportionate role. She assembled the guest list, paying due attention to the balance of talkers and listeners, to the known friendships and antagonisms of her social circle, issued the invitations and decided on who was paired with whom at the dinner table (Humphry 1897, 58). Furthermore, she was responsible for arranging the dinner table and its decorations in a social environment where, as Rachel Rich has emphasised, "a wrong choice in flowers could also point to poor food and a deceitful hostess" (Rich 2003, 58).

Dressing the Table

The à la Russe practice shifted away from the former table display which emphasised the lavishness of the food and the silver (or gold) plated dishes. The dishes came off the table and, initially, the focus of the new style was on elaborate silver or porcelain ornaments in the centre of the table designed to display the aesthetic sense as well as the financial resources of the family. The *Lady's Newspaper* in 1862 advertised a "table fountain" which threw a tiny jet of perfumed water (23 May 1862, 560). As the numbers of those wishing to present themselves as "middle class" increased, the emphasis switched to flowers and greenery which were presented as "cooler", less costly and scenting the room more delicately (*Millom Gazette* 19 August 1898, 6). In 1865, the *Walsall Free Press* (3 June 1865, 2), noted the number of prizes being offered by Horticultural Societies for the best "à la Russe" table decorations.

Newly aspiring men and women lacked the "plate" to display, the requisite crockery, perhaps even the money needed to buy in the "greenery" and flowers for the table and from the 1850s onwards, firms and agencies competed to hire the "requisites" for the dinner party – tables, chairs, glassware, decorations, even, it was alleged, the displays of fruit (see *Watford Observer* 17 October 1868, 1 (crockery, furniture, waiters); *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* 1 July 1875, 22 (hired-in fruit)). At the dinner table, the evolution of the table decoration away from displays of massive plate to flowers and greenery put greater stress on the aesthetic sense of the hostess – as a number of "Ladies Columns" in the newspapers of the late century reflected (e.g. *Falkirk Evening Herald* 8 December 1897, 2). In 1881, *Manners of the Aristocracy* noted that tables were now "presenting the appearance of positive gardens" (Anonymous 1881, 39) and books such Mrs Alfred Praga's *Dainty Dinner Tables*, supposedly aimed at those of "limited" means, stressed the importance of colour-matched flowers, decorations, glassware and menu cards – e.g. yellow menu cards with brown ink to match the marigolds on the table (Praga 1907, 64).

Such care extended to the glassware – one of the several impacts of the à la Russe style on the material culture of the table. A growing fashion for different types of wine reinforced (may indeed have created) the Victorian preference for an array of different shapes, sizes and colours of wine glass on the dinner table, although it was claimed that true connoisseurs preferred plain glass (Loftie 1878, 95). Knowledge of which glass to

use for which wine became an essential element in the social knowledge of younger and less experienced drinkers (Young 2010, 136). Until the mid-1850s, glassware firms did not have extensive catalogues of products; these emerged in parallel with the switch to à la Russe and its insistence on specific wines for each course (Wolfenden 1995, 44). The insistence on separate glasses led to passages in etiquette books instructing would-be diners on which glass to use with which wine: "that with the small saucer-like top [is] for champagne" (Anonymous 1876, 98).

Styles of glassware changed during the period from 1850 to 1914, reflecting less changes in the choice of wine than the broader fashion-led desire for innovation. Thus, coloured glassware become popular in the 1880s. Hock glasses might be blue, green, ruby or pale golden brown (*Girl's Own Paper* 14 November 1885, 105); claret glasses were generally clear (though occasionally tinted) whilst there was a fashion for gold-decorated champagne glasses with extremely tall stems in the early 1900s (*Dundee Evening Telegraph* 27 October 1902, 6).

The changes in the material culture of wine reflected the role of the dinner table as a marker of social status. Elaborate sets of glassware, fine dishes (particularly for the sweetmeats displayed on the table), and the quality of the table decorations were marks of both cultural and financial capital. Although articles on creating low-cost decorations were not uncommon (see, for example, *The Woman's Signal* 6 February 1896, 2 for a how-to guide on decoration with only flowers and brocade), the consensus of contemporaries was evident. The à la Russe style was a manifestation of taste, wealth and luxury manifested in both décor and consumables.

The alimentary structure of the à la Russe dinner has been well documented by Mars (1997) and, more recently, Broomfield (2007). Here I will discuss only the essentials of the style. The architecture of the dinner as described by Trollope was largely formalized by the 1860s, though separate elements underwent modification throughout the century. As Linda Young has similarly argued in her discussions of Victorian dinner party etiquette, à la Russe was never a monolithic code. There were always what she calls a "range of internal variations" (Young 2010, 134). In practice, the dinner table was a space where alimentary if not social rules "shifted constantly" (Hyman 2009, 3).

The central point was that food was no longer carved at the table by the host but carved at a side-table by a servant and thence "handed" to the guests. Wine was treated in the same way. No longer was it on the table for guests to help themselves and others but for the greater part of the meal it was poured for the guests by the servants. Secondly, though there were almost always choices for the guests to make, their choice was now constrained. In earlier styles of service with all the dishes on the table, the guests could, in practice, compose their own meal, sampling one dish or many and returning for second helpings if they so wished. In the à la Russe style, this was replaced by a consistent architecture of "services" and "courses" which followed a set order and, if contemporaries are to be believed, an almost equally strict selection of dishes (e.g. saddle of mutton) that were served as if by rote at each dinner party (Greville 1892, 86).

Though the structure of the meal was largely unvaried in principle its composition began to change significantly in the 1880s. Soup (two kinds) was followed by fish (three or four dishes), then *entrées* (the hot "made dishes" of the sort that Trollope execrated). Entrées were usually sauced and, unlike the "Removes" which followed, were never whole joints. A saddle of lamb or mutton was probably the most common "Remove". After the removes came roasts (usually game), then vegetable dishes, a set of sweet and / or iced dishes and finally cheese and dessert including fruits and nuts. At each stage, the diner normally had to make his or her choice, though towards the end of the century it became common to present only one soup and one fish dish. Most such meals had 20-30 different dishes, though diners were under no obligation to choose something at every stage (Thompson 1880, 91). The number of dishes was "amplified" for larger parties and "proportionately reduced" for smaller events. By the 1890s, a "small dinner" composed only 6-8 dishes with only one (or at most two) per category (*Daily Gazette for Middlesbrough* 16 May 1900, 4).

An obligatory menu card enabled each diner to make his or her "plan of campaign" but, compared to the earlier style, the range was more limited and constrained at each stage (Gouffé 1868, 221). To take a second helping of any dish became unacceptable, even "unthinkable" (Humble 2000, 22; Cheadle 1878, 141). Thus, as Cathy Kaufman has stressed, the new style of service prioritised diners as the "audience" for a pre-conceived meal orchestrated and directed by the hostess who organised the food, rather than as "participants" who chose their own meal from a wide range of possible dishes (Kaufman 2002, 123-33). The direction of dinner extended to the management of the servants – be they of the establishment or hired in for the evening.

A major problem for the hostess therefore was the quality of the actors under her control. The skill of the domestic cook was one issue, though standards improved in the later part of the century (St. Helier 1909, 188). For most households the major issue was finding and hiring competent waiting staff. Only the very wealthy employed the servants needed to service a dinner table of any size. Most households would hire in staff for the evening at a cost of 12-15s. per man (Anonymous 1880, 87). The general rule was that one servant was needed for every four guests (though skilled servants could manage six guests). Skill lacking, the result was "confusion and chaos" and the probability that the (hired-in) "greengrocer has warmed the sherry and iced the claret" (*All the Year Round* 31 March 1877, 6). An article in a Scottish newspaper complained that "it is unpleasant to wait, wait, wait between each arrival of something for your employment", whilst being "at the mercy" of the waiters was not a pleasurable experience (*Fifeshire Journal* 30 May 1872, 3). Not only were the guests subject to the butler and waiting staff but these latter tended to "use the wine […] for their private drinking after the dinner in the servants' hall" (Kirwan 1864, 96).

The role of wine at the Victorian dinner party has been little considered. Most of the conduct books were written by and for women with occasional exceptions such as Samuel Beeton's *Complete Etiquette for Gentlemen* (1876) and Charlotte Humphry's

Manners for Men (1897). Wine was a masculine responsibility and received little coverage in most of the books that gave guidance on the conduct of the dinner party and other entertainments beyond an insistent stress on avoiding any signs of inebriation. Yet, it was crucial to sociability at the table.

The Wines

This new taste regime had implications for both the taste, style and service of the wines and the role of wine in Victorian sociability. Firstly, wine came to dominate the dinner table. Beer and ale, which were previously common dinner drinks, were largely "discrowned" (*All the Year Round* 31 March 1877, 104), surviving only as an occasional accompaniment to cheese. Secondly, with the shift to a formalized menu came a more directive deployment of wine. In the 1830s and probably well into the 1850s, the choice of wine was that of the individual guests. *Etiquette for the Ladie*s (Anonymous 1837, 37) shows that though some pairings had been formalized by that time (e.g. champagne with whitebait), a range of wines was usually handed round between each course for diners to choose the wine they wished. The adoption of the à la Russe approach brought about changes in the styles of the wines themselves and the emergence of a rigid and still enduring code of wine and food matching. With soup, there was sherry (occasionally Madeira); with the fish, Chablis or hock. With the "entrées" came champagne, often continued for the remainder of the savoury dishes but sometimes replaced by burgundy (or claret) with the game, succeeded by Madeira and claret (and up until the 1880s, port) with the desserts (Cassell & Co. 1883-4, 262).

Britain, in the 1860s and 1870s, had probably the broadest choice of wines of any nation. The lack of local production meant there were no local loyalties or traditional linkages between specific dishes and specific wines whilst the wealth of the nation meant that – as the dominant British wine merchants of the nineteenth century insisted – a very wide range was available (Gilbey 1869, 5). A French wine producer emphasised the scale of the change in 1879:

> Twenty years ago an English dinner began with Sherry, and ended with Port. At an ordinary table d'hôte of twenty guests, eighteen would have Sherry and Port, one perhaps had Claret, and the other water. Now out of the same number (20) twelve take French wines, Claret, Champagne, Chablis, or Sauterne, – one or two Hock, and the others Sherry, Port, and water (*Ridley & Co's Monthly Wine and Sprit Trade Circular* (*Ridley's*) 12 May 1879, 162).

Cassell's Household Guide (1880s) laid out the order of service:

> After soup, the custom is either for a servant to go round the table saying, "Sherry, sir?" - or "ma'am"- and pouring from the decanter in his hand – about two-thirds of a wine-glassful; or a gentleman seated next to a lady may offer to put sherry into her glass […] During the courses of fish and soup, sherry is served, and hock, or similar kinds of wine, are taken with entrées. As soon as the "roast" is served, champagne

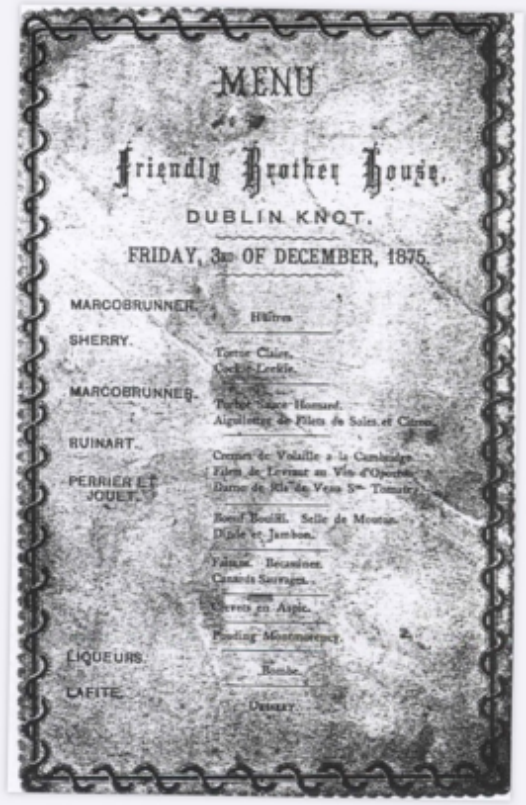
> should be drawn and supplied to the guests. Those who begin with champagne, if well experienced, generally drink no other wine with solid food. At the same time, claret is usually offered during the meat course, red wines being considered particularly suited as an accompaniment to such fare as venison, mutton, and beef […] After ice has been served, small glasses of liqueur are handed round, containing maraschino, curaçoa, or brandy. Young ladies generally decline these stimulants. At dessert, claret, Madeira, and sherry, and sometimes port, are placed opposite the host, who passes the bottles round in succession; the gentlemen, on this occasion, performing the office of filling the ladies' glasses nearest, to them (Cassell & Co. 1883-4, 262).

Providing the wine was the responsibility of the "master" of the house. Not just the conduct and etiquette books but all the manuals on the selection, storage and cellaring of wine assumed a male subject, whether this was the butler or the head of the household. The title of wine merchant Louis Feuerheerd's 1899 book sums up the Victorian assumption: *The Gentleman's Cellar and Butler's Guide.* The former owned the cellar and he, if he could so afford, employed a butler whose manifold duties included all aspects of caring for his master's wine (Feuerheerd 1899). If the household could not afford a butler, then the responsibility devolved on its owner – with the support of manuals such as Cyrus Redding's *Every Man His Own Butler* (1839/1853) or L.P. Mouraille's similar 1889 text which gave detailed DIY advice on all the cellar tasks (Redding 1853; Mouraille 1889).

By the end of the century, Lady Violet Greville was suggesting that a typical "young man leaves the key of the cellar to the butler [and] the choice of wine to his wine merchant" (Greville 1892, 81) but in "dinner-giving" houses the dinner menu was selected by the mistress and her cook and the wines by the master (Thackeray 1904, 274). The extensive menus and dinner party lists in the diaries of the *Punch* cartoonist Linley Sambourne and his wife Marion make the responsibilities clear (Nicholson 1998, 70-71). Linley provided the champagne; Marion the food. Quite how closely the tenets of wine pairing were observed in family dinner parties is hard to ascertain. Marion Sambourne's diaries do not generally specify which wine went with which dish.

However, a number of menus survive from public or formal dinners that identify these pairings. A dinner menu (figure 1A/B) for the 1875 meeting of the "Dublin Knot" of the "Friendly Brothers of St. Patrick", a long-established "convivial club" with aristocratic origins, demonstrates both the structure of the formal à la Russe dinner and the wine matches (Buckley 1987, 40). Here, the wines are listed to the left of the dishes and clearly associated with each separate stage of the dinner. This dinner listed only five wines. Marcobrunner, a German white wine, was offered with the oysters and with the two fish dishes (turbot and sole). The champagnes (Ruinart and Perrier-Jouët) were used to accompany all the meat and game dishes; from chicken, hare and veal to the beef and mutton and then the pheasant and wild ducks. The final wine was Château Lafite with the dessert. This exemplified the Victorian practice of using high quality claret – typically "first growth" wines – at the end of the meal (Humphry 1897, 79; "A

Member of the aristocracy" 1879, 106). A "sound dinner claret" for a domestic dinner party might range from around 30s. to 74s. a dozen at most, the claret taken with the dessert course would be as much as 96s a dozen (Anonymous 1880, 209). The Château Lafite in the 1876 menu below would have cost at least 80s. per dozen at retail compared to 12s. a dozen for the cheapest "Dinner Claret" (*Sheffield Daily Telegraph* 1 January 1870, 1).


MENU

Friendly Brothers House.

DUBLIN KNOT.

FRIDAY, 3rd OF DECEMBER, 1875.

MARCOBRUNNER.

Huîtres

SHERRY.

Tortue Claire.
Cockie Leekie.

MARCOBRUNNER.

Turbot Sauce Homard.
Aiguillettes de Filets de Soles et Citron.

RUINART.

Crèmes de Volaille à la Cambridge

PERRIER ET JOUET.

Filets de Levraut au Vin d'Oporto.
Darne de Ris de Veau Sce Tomate.

Bœuf Bouilli. Selle de Mouton.
Dinde et Jambon.

Faisan. Becassines.
Canards Sauvages.

Cresses en Aspic.

Pouding Montmorency.

LIQUEURS.

Bombe.

LAFITE.

Dessert.

Figure 1: "Friendly Brothers House", Menu, 3 December 1875. *Menu Collection*. 28. https://arrow.tudublin.ie/menus/28.

Figure 1: "Friendly Brothers House", Menu, 3 December 1875. *Menu Collection*. 28. https://arrow.tudublin.ie/menus/28.

Wine	**Dishes**
Marcobrunner	Huîtres (oysters)
Sherry	Tortue Claire (clear turtle soup)
	Cockie Leekie (leek and chicken soup)
Marcobrunner	Turbot, sauce Homard (turbot with lobster sauce)
	Aiguillettes de Filet de Soles et Citron (strips of sole with lemon)
Ruinart champagne	Crèmes de Volaille à la Cambridge (chicken in cream and brandy)
Perrier-Jouët champagne	Filets de Levraut au vin d'Oporto (fillets of hare in port sauce)
	Darne de Ris de Veau et Sauce Tomate (veal sweetbreads with tomato sauce)

	Bœuf Bouilli (boiled beef)
	Selle de Mouton (saddle of mutton)
	Dinde et Jambon (turkey and ham)
	Faisans, Bécassines (pheasant and snipe)
	Canards Sauvages (wild duck)
	Crevets en Aspic (prawns in aspic)
	Pouding Montmorency (cherry pudding)
Liqueurs	Bombe (iced pudding)
Château Lafite	Dessert

The Rise of (Dry) Champagne

As this menu and many others show, champagne came to have a major role in Victorian dinners. It was drunk with many different dishes in both public and domestic dinners and, after the single glass of sherry with the soup, many diners switched to champagne for the rest of the meal. In France champagne was – and continued to be – a sweet wine taken with sweet dishes. In England the style switched from sweet to dry in the 1850s as champagne began to accompany roast meats. As the champagne expert George Harley explained to readers of *The Contemporary Review* in 1896 in a retrospective on wines of the previous half century, it was necessary to have a dry wine to accompany meat dishes and "sour sauces" (Harley 1896, 894).

The "cult" of dry wine, as the trade journal the *Caterer* termed it (quoted in *Ridley's* 12 August 1892, 451), was reinforced by the need to display. Most wines were decanted but champagne was always served from the bottle with the label visible (though the napkin occasionally used to prevent drips might conceal it).

Figure 2: *Punch*, 16 June 1883, p. 282. Note distinctive shape of the champagne bottle to left of picture.

The brand on the label and cork was visible and significant. Though it was considered a breach of etiquette by a guest to check the cork to ensure the wine's provenance it was clearly far from unknown (Anonymous 1880, 102). As *Ridley's* commented, the consumers "must be able to call their Wine a crack brand of a crack vintage." Quality, added the journal, was a "secondary consideration" to most consumers (*Ridley's* 12 April 1893, 217). As early as 1885, the London *Standard* had written of dry wine that "it is astonishing how people get reconciled to drinking anything, provided it be the fashion to do so" (*London Standard* 21 May 1885, 5).

Nonetheless, the British taste – among upper-class diners at least – for dry champagne was used as an indication of both superior discrimination and culinary innovation in the United Kingdom. The Bristol merchant and champagne expert Charles Tovey claimed that a dry champagne must be a "perfect wine", whilst the sweeter French style could conceal defects (*Ridley's* 12 October 1883, 306). As champagne became a dry wine, so it became increasingly dominant at the dinner table. By the 1870s (if not earlier) there was a fashion for champagne-only dinners (Ottomeyer 2011, 139). John Galsworthy (the son of a wine merchant), writing in 1908, but describing a dinner of the 1880s, had his fictional Forsyte family drink nothing but champagne after their sole glass of sherry (Galsworthy 1970, 24, 32, 97).

By the beginning of the 1880s this formalization had begun to be called into question. An 1880 article on "Dinner Wines" from the *Queen* magazine lamented the "poverty of invention" evinced by the "constant recurrence" of champagne at the dinner table (cited in *Shields Daily Gazette* 26 January 1880, 4). In 1899, Louis Feuerheerd, expressed his "hope that this fashion will soon die out, because the drinking of dry champagne with all kinds of food is not commendable" (Feuerheerd 1899, 61). As dinners shortened so the number of wines served began to diminish. The *Western Times* reported (8 November 1890, 2) on the "simplification of the wine list." Hock and claret were deemed sufficient for small dinners and the fashion for champagne as a domestic dinner wine began to diminish (*Daily Gazette for Middlesbrough* 16 May 1900, 4).

Champagne's Symbolic Role

But the champagne had symbolic as well as gastronomic value. Because champagne was served from the bottle ("of course") rather than subject to the "heathenian practice" of decanting, it was a visible symbol of the financial resource of the hosts (Anonymous 1881, 138; see also *Dublin Daily Express* 23 June 1882, 7). By the 1870s, the consumer market was dominated by "fashionable (or "celebrated") brands" whose price was well known to consumers (*Ridley's* 10 October 1870, 8). The level of the host's generosity (or meanness) was clearly perceived on the table. Lastly, champagne was a disinhibitor, valued by hosts and hostesses for its ability to set the table alight. In 1871, *London Society* described its effects thus: "[a] murmur as of a rising storm runs round

the table: badinage commences, flirtations flourish" (*London Society* 20: 116, August 1871, 170-75).

There is a paradox here. Middle-class Victorian society set and ardently policed boundaries. Those of a lower status had to wait for those of higher status to approach them; conversing with someone at a ball or dinner did not grant the right to presume you had been introduced; inviting a superior to "take wine" with you was unacceptable (Anonymous 1881, 33). Champagne broke down some of these boundaries. Hence animation and flirtations. The wine writer, Henry Vizetelly described the effect of champagne. "Placed", he wrote, "between a young lady just out and a dowager of grimly Gorgonesque aspect, you hesitate how to open a conversation. Your first attempts […] are singularly ineffectual, only eliciting a dropping fire of monosyllables." But then the butler whispers the "magic word". Out comes the champagne, in comes the party spirit. "The young lady on your right suddenly develops […] an astounding aptness for repartee and the Gorgon thaws." "Now", he went on, "ripples of silvery laughter rise in accompaniment to the beaded bubbles all round the table" (Vizetelly 1882, 262).

Yet inebriation was, according to all the etiquette books, a fatal sin at the Victorian table. Mrs Humphry in *Manners for Men*, was emphatic:

> It is scarcely necessary to remark that drinking too much wine is a very bad phase of ill manners. At one time it was actually fashionable to become intoxicated after dinner, but those days are long gone, I am thankful to say. The young man who exceeds in this way soon made aware of the fact that he has given his hostess dire offence. He is never invited again, or not for a long time (Humphry 1897, 66; see also Hardy 1890, 32).

Women's drinking was – at least in etiquette books – still more strictly monitored. More than one glass of wine during the dessert was discouraged ("A Member of the aristocracy" 1879, 104). For "A Matron" writing in 1859, "drinking much wine is vulgar" (A Matron 1859, 328). Florence Hartley, the American commentator on manners, in her *Ladies Book of Etiquette* (1860) was yet more forthright: "No lady should drink wine at dinner. Even if her head is strong enough to bear it, she will find her cheeks, soon after the indulgence, flushed, hot and uncomfortable" (Hartley 1860, 102). Such strictures had lessened by the end of the century and were almost certainly honoured more in the breach than the observance. In 1879, a London periodical described champagne as the "one wine that almost everybody enjoys" (*Saturday Review* 47:1227, 3 May 1879, 552). The anonymous author of *Party-giving* in 1880 counselled that "[i]n providing champagne, half a bottle to each man and a third of a bottle to each lady would be a fair proportion" (Anonymous 1880, 209). By the end of the century it was a truism that champagne was women's preferred wine (*Ridley's* 12 October 1899, 701). In 1907, the *Dundee Evening Telegraph* (26 September 1907, 6), writing of the "change in English manners", argued that "all recent changes [in dinner

parties] have tended to the relaxation of formality." The paper emphasised that "stiffness is next to impossible with the dinner à la Russe, with dishes carved on the sideboards, and with a perennial flow of champagne. There is a sense of sweetness and light; the flowers favour têtes-à-têtes, and the scents inspire flirtations." There is a further contradiction here. Because the wines were handed by servants, the traditional custom of inviting a fellow guest to "take wine" fell into disuse after the 1860s. Formality might have been relaxed; intimacy did not necessarily follow.

The "Taking of Wine"

Taking wine with a fellow guest was an indication of particular regard, initiated by the superior in status. A man could invite a fellow guest – male or female – to drink wine with him; the wine either his choice or, more usually, that of his counterpart (Anonymous 1876, 97). This form of sociability had fostered a one-to-one connection between guests as men (but not women) would invite either a male or female companion to drink with them to initiate or reinforce a social or personal link with the other.

This "customary habit" of the first thirty or forty years of the nineteenth century began to fall into disuse in the 1840s. The immediate cause was the "temperate turn" that swept over England from the 1830s onwards (Harding 2018, 38-41). In the old system, particularly during the first two decades of the century when "decanters on the table" was the norm, a diner's glass would only be refilled on taking wine with another. The glasses of both parties would be filled and both parties were expected to empty the glass (Pryme and Bayne 1870, 21-22; see also *Yorkshire Post* 24 August 1867, 6). This custom had two consequences. Firstly, it encouraged drunkenness. Courteous hosts felt they should take a glass with every guest; habitual topers "made use of this act of courtesy to imbibe freely so that […] by the time they reached the drawing room, many of them would be quite unfit for the society of respectable females" (*Worcestershire Chronicle* 1 November 1879, 6). Secondly, it posed a problem to "many a young diner, who shrinking from the sound of his own voice, has been content to see his glass empty rather than submit to the inevitable tax on its replenishment" (*Graphic* 28 October 1882, 15).

By the 1870s this practice survived only in "the country" or at formal dinners in institutions such as the Inns of Court. Mrs Beeton reported in 1861 that at "many tables" the practice had been abolished, though a man was still obliged to help his neighbour to wine should she so wish (Beeton 1876, 28, 40). By 1880, *Cassell's Household Guide* said it was practised between "intimate friends" only (Humble 2000, 23; Cassell & Co. 1883-4, 261). After the 1860s the practice of waiters "handing" wine to individual guests at domestic dinner parties was standard. This probably gave women somewhat greater autonomy since they were no longer dependent on a man inviting them to take wine with him but in other respects it strengthened the host and hostess' control of the table. Independent action was restricted. No longer could a diner

request the wine of his choice; no longer could a carver assign the choicest cuts to a particular individual at the table. The possibility of excess and improper behaviour at the table was minimised. It ties in both with broader patterns of Victorian sociability and with a desire to set in place a mechanistic view of the domestic system.

In the 1880s, *Cassell's Household Guide* insisted that as:

> the affairs of human life are becoming in every department more intricate and complicated, no apology can be needed for an endeavour to set out accurately, and in something like scientific order, the laws which govern, and the rules which should regulate, that most necessary and most important of all human institutions, THE HOUSEHOLD (Cassell & Co. 1883-4, 142).

As early as 1843, an article on the "Genteel London Dinner Party" noted that this is a "manufacturing country, everything is to be done by machinery" and that "the dinner machinery is perfect", though, as the writer accepted, the consequence was that "talk has a pair of stays here, and is laced up tight and stiff" (*Bradford Observer* 1 September 1843, 7). In 1870, Eliza Cheadle reiterated that "[i]n a properly conducted household the machinery will be well looked after, and always work out of sight, and this applies to households of every size" (Cheadle 1878, 107). Both Nicola Humble in her "Introduction" to Mrs Beeton and Linda Young have come to a similar conclusion (Humble 2000, xviii; Young 2010, 133).

The Rule of the Dinner Table

Michael Curtin has warned that Victorian etiquette books give an exaggerated sense of the lifelessness and formality of Victorian social occasions, but contemporary comments make it very clear that the dinner party was a rule-bound and often constrained event (Curtin 1981, 12-13). For Andrew St George in *The Descent of Manners*, the Great Reform Act in 1832 was the moment when "etiquette gave way to manners and became a class-based set of rules for admitting oneself and keeping others out" (St. George 1993, 7). By starting to address the gross inequalities of electoral representation and enfranchise a growing middle-class populace the 1832 Reform Act opened up the possibility of social and political ascent to match the increasing prosperity of professional and mercantile groups. As the interests of the upper and middle classes began to converge so the latter found reason to study the conduct and manners of the former and, in so doing, stress their differences from the working or labouring classes. Anna Bryson has argued that the rules embodied in the books of social conduct reflected their authors' view of how "status and authority were conveyed in everyday social ritual." They were not simply imposed on society but co-created as "active ways in which individuals and groups position[ed] themselves and each other in the social order" (Bryson 1998, 8, 18).

Victorian society was competitive. The Victorian middle class that developed in the 1830s was both highly stratified and deeply anxious. This group, perhaps ten per cent

of the population at most and earning between £300-£1000 per annum, was divided "vertically as well as horizontally." In Harold Perkin's depiction they were "ever more graduated in income and status [and] came to express those finer distinctions in prosperity and society position physically" (Perkin 1989, 3, 27, 29). The dinner party was a means of displaying resource and asserting status. Thus, the alert hostess must accept that "competition is a serious matter to cope with; it is both keen and alert […] she must be up to date in surroundings and accessories, in what is of importance as well in mere trifles" (Au Fait 1896, 118).

At a deeper level, the taste regime underpinning Victorian dining was a means of imposing order on a disorderly and often frightening external world. In this ordering the women's role was central. Her gift, as Ruskin said, was for "sweet ordering" (Ruskin and Nord 2002, 77). Significantly, the angel in the home was an active "managing angel" (Langland 1995, passim, esp. 1-23). She organised the seating plan to make the most of the guests who formed her human resources; her very presence helped to control and order the topics of conversation. The ending of the old practice of taking wine inhibited the formation of independent social links.

The practice of à la Russe was used by Victorians to inscribe boundaries both at the table and in the broader world of social differentiation. Though much of the work of this service style fell upon women it also embraced male behaviour. As we have seen, the table decoration and the provision of food were female tasks and competence displayed at these tasks was a marker of social acceptability. At the table the host and hostess both took some level of responsibility for conversation and sociability, though conversational "lions" were often recruited to enliven the event (with mixed success), whilst guests both male and female were expected to know and to follow the rules of polite behaviour and conversation. Transgression of the rules was taken seriously. As Samuel Beeton put it in his guide to gentlemanly etiquette, "be exceedingly careful never to say or do anything at table which can produce disgust" (Beeton 1876, 28).

Arguably, the change to à la Russe changed the balance of gender around the table. Though the dining room itself was initially seen as a masculine space, it was the hostess who directed the theatre of dinner (Hamlett 2010, 41). Margaret Oliphant's enormously successful mid-century novel *Miss Marjoribanks* (1866) made it very clear that, in provincial as in London society, the hostess was the social animator of the local community; even when, as in Lucilla Marjoribanks's case, she was the young daughter of a widowed doctor. The dozens of "Thursday evening" dinners she orchestrates in the course of the novel rescue her father from loneliness and re-animate the fictional Carlingford (Oliphant 1969). In the re-ordering entailed by the à la Russe regime, the role of men was increasingly circumscribed. No longer were they expected to carve. No longer were they expected to maintain sociability by taking wine with each of the guests in turn. The only vital role they played in the provision of dinner was that of providing, or at least purchasing, wine. An 1880 text on "entertainments" went so far as to suggest that men:

> make a point of giving the very best champagne to their guests, knowing that this part of the entertainment reflects directly upon a host rather than upon a hostess; that he is responsible for the wine provided. Thus, if his pocket will not allow of his giving very superior champagne, he exerts himself to procure the best he can at his price (Anonymous 1880, 102).

Regime Change and the Afterlife of à la Russe

The à la Russe regime endured in domestic households into the first decade of the twentieth century. But, by 1907, the stage of sociability was shifting. The dinner à la Russe had removed one layer of anxiety from the host and hostess by reducing the guest's choice and freedom of action. The menu card dictated the choices available to the diners. No longer were second helpings considered socially acceptable (*Newcastle Courant* 26 June 1885, 6). No longer were guests expected to serve their companions. Sociability was controlled, even time was mastered in the well-run household. The dinner party was expected to take some ninety minutes – no longer (Anonymous 1880, 177). But anxieties remained. Would the cook perform; would the waiters play their part? The home began to lose its place as the epicentre of social dining.

In 1905, the agent for Moët & Chandon champagne, André Simon, wrote that the public "prefer the certainty of a well-served meal to the possible vagaries of their cook, and […] prefer the inclusive charge of the restaurant to the worry, trouble, expense and probable mishaps of a big dinner at home" (Simon 1905, 152-3). For the *Country Gentleman* (26 March 1898, 404), society was approaching the point when "all dinners will be taken out." The hostess, the magazine wrote, has "only to fix the hour and day when her guests are to assemble at one of the perfectly appointed restaurants with which London abounds."

The switch to restaurant dining made the display of financial and social capital yet more visible on the table. The change was further strengthened by the trend amongst the British elite to live not in houses with cellars but in West End mansion flats where, as *Ridley's* (12 September 1899, 621) observed, there was no space for wine other than the "homely cupboard". After 1919, cartoons of restaurant tables with conspicuous champagne ice-pails, bottles and glasses replaced the domestic tables – whether grand or humble – that had dominated the visual representation of dining in the nineteenth century.

Figure 3: *Punch*, 19 January 1921, p. 47. The 'Rhino-Hydes' at dinner. Note the two bottles of champagne in the ice-pail.

Restaurant dining also re-established the male role as provider of hospitality that had been challenged by the switch to hostess-led domestic dining. In restaurants, men chose the menu and the wine, though, as the pioneer restaurant critic Nathaniel Newnham-Davis pointed out, the waiters usually opened the wine list on the champagne page to satisfy female taste (Newnham-Davis 1899, xx, 16).

Occasional references to "dinner à la Russe" continued at least until the 1930s but these were almost always for public rather than private events (see *Leeds Mercury* 2 March 1936, 8). The term "à la Russe" was used by restaurants for occasions such as Christmas and for public dinners held by civic or government bodies. However, this designation appears to have referred less to the style of service than the linking of wines to specific courses since almost all food in restaurants and at public dinners was, by default, served by waiters. The 1897 Christmas menu created by the chef G. Frederick Macro which was offered by the Imperial Hotel in Cork gave precedence to the wines on the left of the menu with the choice of dishes to the right (Mac Con Iomaire 2015, 374-5). As late as 1935, the "inaugural banquet" for forty people to celebrate the entry of a new High Sheriff in Buckinghamshire was reported at being served "à la Russe" (*Bucks Herald* 15 March 1935, 6).

The practice of dining à la Russe at home, however, appears to have collapsed after the first decade of the twentieth century. So too did the dinner party habit – at least as measured by newspaper mentions. In the period 1850-1909, there were, on average, over 2,800 references to "dinner party" in articles and advertisements every year in the British Newspaper Archive database of provincial and national newspapers. From 1910 to 1939, this figure fell to around 1000 per year. In 1926, a long article entitled "When

Madame Entertains to Dinner" claimed that "giving a small dinner party is such an easy form of entertainment that I often wonder it is not more popular" (*Dundee Courier* 9 August 1926, 9). But to no apparent avail. The number of mentions fell further after World War II to around 300 references per year with a small rise in the 1990s to some 500 per year.

The question in a headline in the *Nottingham Evening Post* (10 April 1950, 3) was "What has killed the dinner party?" The answer, according to journalist Ruth Bowley, was not lack of food or money but "because the wives are too tired to do the work." Women's work was central to the nineteenth-century dinner à la Russe. Their social, managerial and aesthetic labour made the dinner party; disrupting, re-creating and feminizing nineteenth-century domestic sociability.

Conclusions

The à la Russe regime was not simply a system of service at the domestic and public table but a reflection of a society in which consumption and comportment played equal and vital roles. Functionally, the elaborate architecture and profusion of dishes that characterised the à la Russe meal are almost entirely things of the past; lost after the First World War and never regained. What has survived in British dining is the reductive architecture of "starter", "main", and "dessert" and the still prevalent ordered wine pairings that dominate the table, assigning specific roles to dry white wine and to red wine. Red wine with fish is still unthinkable to many consumers.

Symbolically, the end of à la Russe coincided with changes in the role of women. For most of the nineteenth century, middle-class women were confined to the private sphere. They moved from one socially acceptable household to another, aspiring to climb the social ladder but doing so through an ordered regime of domestic visits and largely domestic entertaining. Only in the latter part of the century did it become acceptable for women to dine in public with men to whom they were related neither by blood nor marriage. Brenda Assael has suggested that women dining out of home were still the subject of disapproval in the early twentieth century but the late nineteenth century restaurant reviews of Nathaniel Newnham Davis clearly show not just the performative skills of his female companions (from actresses to aunts) but the normalcy of their behaviour as restaurant-goers. Never is there a hint of impropriety (Newnham-Davis 1899, passim). By the end of the Edwardian period, as Assael concluded, the "restaurant was eclipsing these two venues [home and club] as a site of elite sociability and display" (Assael 2018, 193-4). Though an article attributed to "*The Lady*" in a Dundee paper raised the question "Should women dine at restaurants?", this apparently generated no more than one reference in the British press (see *Dundee Evening Telegraph* 1 August, 1899, 4). There is no evidence that it was generally seen as a problem.

Arguably this change reflected a middle-class society more at ease with itself and less concerned about the fear of social disorder. As Bryson suggested in her remarks about the role of manners, à la Russe reflected the society that created and enforced it. Victorian Britain developed elaborate rules in an attempt to control sociability and socialising. It was, I conclude, an attempt to impose order on the possibility of disorder. The dinner table acted as the domestic microcosm of broader Victorian society seen through the lens of a middle class created by and in response to the Great Reform Act and still finding its way until the late years of the century.

Acknowledgements

I gratefully acknowledge not only the helpful editorial guidance and the menu suggestions made by Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire but also the perceptive comments of two anonymous reviewers.

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